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EAST WORLD

JAPAN'S CRAZY CATS

The Greatest Team You've Never Heard Of

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MOST OF THE GREAT COMEDY TEAMS HAD THEIR roots in vaudeville or burlesque, and when those venues died the classical Hollywood comedy team came to end. Martin & Lewis were the last team to make a real impact in films—those that followed (Rowan & Martin, Allen & Rossi) were generally limited to television appearances. But in post-war Japan, heavily influenced by Hollywood movie genres and the American occupation, several film comedy teams emerged and, in their own way, carried on the Hollywood comedy team tradition through the end of the 1960s.



Opposite page: (Top) Hitoshi Ueki, one of the lead "Crazy Cats," still performing in the 1990s [Photo courtesy Watanabe Production]; (Bottom) After the Crazy Cats broke up, Hajime Hana starred in films like 1971's *There Are Flowers and Seeds*, Tamegoro for Shochiku Studios.

This page: (Left) At the Riviera Hotel for Las Vegas Free-for-All (1967), directed by Takashi Tsuboshima. Pictured, left to right: Hajime Hana, Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Peggy Neal, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi. [Photo courtesy Watanabe Production]; (Below) Lovely Mie Hama was a featured co-star in several Crazy Cats movies.

Best among these was a group called The Crazy Cats. Part Spike Jones, part Marx Brothers, the seven-member group was enormously popular on stage, in television, and in not one but several film series. They appeared more-or-less collectively in some 30 films in just nine years, from *Japan's Irresponsible Age* in 1962 to *Japan's Most Shocking Man* in 1971, the year the Japanese film industry all but collapsed. The three most popular Crazy Cats, Hitoshi Ueki (b.1927), Kei Tani (b.1932), and Hajime Hana (1930-1993), concurrently starred in films of their own, and all enjoyed successful solo careers after they went their separate ways in the early '70s. This success was partly due to the fact that, in their films at least, The Crazy Cats generally played disparate characters linked by the story's machinations, as opposed to, say, the inseparable Laurel & Hardy. The team remained close, however, and often made cameos in each others movies.

Unfortunately, The Crazy Cats have had very little exposure in the United States. Most of their films were released here back in the '60s, but restricted to venues like the Toho La Brea in Los Angeles and other Japanese neighborhood theaters on the so-called "Sukiaki Circuit." Though one of the best Crazy Cats movies, *Big Adventure* (*Dai boken*, 1965), was revived briefly (and cryptically) in New York as *Don't Call Me a Crime Man*, their films, like Japanese films in general, rarely get any theatrical play in the United States, and none of their films are available domestically on home video.

But they should be. Though rarely laugh-out-loud funny, The Crazy Cats exuded an enormous likability, and their films were well produced and often very clever. The septet—the other members were Hiroshi Inuzuka (b. 1929), Senri Sakurai (b. 1930), Shin Yasuda (1932-1997), and Eitaro Ishibashi (1927-1995)—started out as musicians: Ueki played guitar and did vocals, Hana was the drummer, →



Right: *The Crazy Cats* in the 1970s, minus Eitaro Ishibashi, who had left the team by this time. From left: Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Hajime Hana, Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, and Shin Yasuda. [Photo courtesy Watanabe Production]

Far right: Hitoshi Ueki today. [Photo courtesy Watanabe Production]

Below: Members of the disbanded team frequently turned up in each other's films. Here's Kei Tani (shown at bottom of poster) making an appearance in Hajime Hana's *No Matter What, Tamegoro* (1970), filmed at Shochiku Studios.



Tani played trombone, Sakurai and Ishibashi played piano, Inuzuka played string bass, and Yasuda was on tenor sax. (Yasuda replaced Masahiro Ishida, who was with the group briefly in the mid-'50s; he died in 1985).

Surprisingly, these musicians-cum-movie-stars all became fine character actors, and some also superb comedians. Hitoshi Ueki, for instance, created a persona whose popularity was rooted in a singularly un-Japanese paradox: the irresponsible salaryman. Then, as now, Japanese society is built upon conformity. Ueki's character, by contrast, was brazen and ostentatious, even manic, forever scheming, breaking every rule of protocol—and protocol is everything in Japan. Between *Crazy Cats* comedies Ueki starred in his own popular film series, called "Irresponsible!," often featuring other *Crazy Cats* in guest roles.



Ueki often wore bright green suits in the "lounge lizard" vein (yet they were, somehow, also really hip); he was almost always flashing a huge, infectious smile, which became a trademark. No matter how bleak matters might have appeared for Ueki's character, there was always some new scheme just around the corner, and like Robert Morse's window washer in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, Ueki knows he's destined for the top of

the corporate ladder. He was, in short, the fantasy figure of the postwar Japanese white collar worker—everyone longed to be as irresponsible as Ueki, even for just one day. "Daily life is hectic for Japanese people," Ueki says. "Audiences want to recover from that, and these films, I suppose, are a kind of catharsis."

More conventional though no less amusing, Hajime Hana excelled playing boastful, greedy characters, usually mid-level management or government types, often frustrated to Daffy Duck heights of exasperation, but he was also fine in genial Falstaffian roles as well. Kei Tani (who took his stage name from Danny Kaye; in Japan his name is said "Tani Kei") was the patsy. Round-faced with a nervous tic not unlike Herbert Lom's character from the *Pink Panther* movies, Tani's schlemiels were rarely stupid but usually subservient and frequently lovesick. Inuzuka, Sakurai, Yasuda, and Ishibashi turned up in a wide range of supporting roles—more on them later.

The *Crazy Cats* movies were produced by Toho Studios. The later, more expensive films were co-produced with Watanabe Production (sic), a multimedia agency who represented the team, but they probably did little more than defray production costs by paying the actors' salaries, for all of their films are unmistakably produced in the Toho house style. Located in the Tokyo suburb of Setagaya, Toho was the studio of legendary filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. It was also—and still is—home to *Godzilla* and most of Japan's best sci-fi and fantasy films.

I met Ueki, whose plate of film, television, and stage appearances was still full in 1996, at Watanabe Production in Tokyo's theater district. Still mourning the deaths of Ishibashi and especially Hana, his close friend of nearly 50 years, Ueki was subdued and somewhat despondent, but it was also clear that keeping the memories of the team alive meant everything to him. "Hanasan was the boss of the team. Hana-san made the team himself and was really the spirit of The *Crazy Cats*. Hiroshi Inuzuka and Hana met first, then Kei Tani. Ishibashi, Sakurai, and Yasuda joined the *Crazy Cats* later. This was right after World War II, and we played mainly on American army bases—that was our main business at first. Not only playing—we had to do something comical to induce clapping from the audience. The problem was we couldn't speak English, only a kind of broken English. At first we played Afro-Cuban music... sometimes cracking a joke. At that time the band was called The Cuban Cats. People would say to us, 'Hey, you're crazy!' and so we finally asked ourselves, 'Why don't we call ourselves The *Crazy Cats*?'"



Besides Ishida's departure in 1957, there were other changes that lead to the group's peculiar make-up, including two pianists. "Eitaro Ishibashi originally played the piano solo," Ueki says, "but around this time he had to go to the hospital for a time, and Senri Sakurai joined the group. When Eitaro-san came back, we realized we had two piano players! And that's the way the *Crazy Cats* remained until the end."

"[Hana] was a really serious jazz musician, and he looked a little weird and strange at the time. He suggested we make the atmosphere more comical and asked me if I would join. On April 1, 1956, The *Crazy Cats* was made. Kei Tani, Senri Sakurai and I were members of 'Frankie Sakai and His City Slickers' [obviously patterned after Spike Jones's group] and when Tani-san and Sakurai-san left I was asked not to go as Frankie Sakai's group would have lost three of us at once. And so I waited and

joined The Crazy Cats a year later."

Ueki describes Hana as "a practical joker, always lying and tricking people. At nightclubs, Hana would knock on the door when no one was looking, open the door and stick his head out and pretend to be talking to someone, then he'd tell one of us that our boss wanted to see them at once...in his office several blocks away! Since he was a kid he was like that—he loved pulling practical jokes. He had a vision for a comical band from a very early age. We picked a lot up from Spike Jones's orchestrations, but Hana tailored The Crazy Cats to his own taste."



Left: The Peanuts (Emi and Yumi Ito), best known as the twin priestesses in Mothra, were regulars on The Crazy Cats' TV show and would sometimes appear in their movies.

Kei Tani also contributed gags to the team, though his contributions to The Crazy Cats' movies were limited and usually uncredited. Like Hana, Tani was also a serious musician. "He's very sharp. He's got tons of ideas," Ueki says. "There's a really famous joke for jazz musicians in Japan, *Swing Journal*, and always The Crazy Cats made the Top Ten. Now Kei Tani has his own band, which he named 'Supermarket' because he wants to play music from all over the world: Classical, jazz, pop, ethnic music, everything! He's starring in television dramas, in films—he's very popular right now. He's in good shape and doing very well. Nowadays, I only do concerts when it's convenient; it's pretty difficult to be as busy as he is. We did co-star together in a TV show recently where we played a pair of bank robbers."

The Crazy Cats' television career began when Fuji-TV debuted a musical-comedy television program (which ran a daunting Monday-Saturday schedule) where the team became instant stars. Soon enough, they starred in a variety of variety programs, variously called *Otono-no-magna*, *The Crazy Cats Show*, *Weekly Crazy*, *Soap Bubble Holiday*, and, finally, *The Hitoshi Ueki Show*. At this same time, about 1961-62, Toho began putting The Crazy Cats in supporting roles of youth-oriented, white collar musicals like *Young Generation* (1962), which also starred Japanese pop star Kyu Sakamoto (he and Ueki each parody the other's signature song in the film), Mie Hama, Akiko Wakabayashi (she and Hama played "Bond Girls" in *You Only Live Twice*), Yoko Fujiyama (*Atragon*), Tatsuo Matsumura (Kurosawa's *Madadayo*), Akihiko Hirata (the tormented scientist in *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*) and Kenji Sahara (*Rodan*). The team also appeared in *Me and Me* (1962), a musical comedy starring Akira Takarada (the hero of *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!*) and The Peanuts (Emi and Yumi Ito), best known in this country as Mothra's twin priestesses. The twins (and twins are very rare in Japan) were pop stars also represented by Watanabe, and their fame was solidified as regulars on The Crazy Cats' TV show; they would sometimes appear as "guest stars" in the Crazy Cats' movies. Initially, the team's contract with Toho was apparently non-exclusive, and perhaps threatened by their appearance in Shochiku's *The Crazy Bride and Her Seven Friends* earlier that year, Toho began an official Crazy Cats series in 1963.

The first films were standard salaryman comedies, the studio's bread and butter for more than a decade. As the team and their personae became more established, the films became wilder and more distinctive. Later entries spoofed everything from Samurai dramas to sci-fi adventures.

They were also increasingly influenced by Western-made films; especially the James Bond pictures and Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963). In *Big Adventure*, counterfeit ¥10,000 notes are flooding Japan, and reporter Ueki, detective Hana, and inventor Tani eventually wind up on a South Seas island where a still-alive Adolph Hitler (Andrew Hughes) plans to launch nuclear missiles as revenge.

The film is chock-full of Ken Adam-ish set design and impressive action sequences. The picture even features miniature work by special effects master Eiji Tsuburaya, who whipped up a few effects shots between the productions of *Frankenstein Conquers the World* and *Monster Zero*. Probably out of respect for the FX whiz, The Crazy Cats never spoofed the *kaiju eiga* (monster movie) genre, though props and costumes from *Monster Zero* and a few other sci-fi films do turn up in their movies.

The Crazy Cats themselves contributed gags here and there, but generally the quality of their films was in the hands of Toho screenwriters like Ryoza Kasa-hara and Yasuo Tanami as well as composers like Tetsuaki Hagiwara and Shin Miyagawa. Japanese film critics seem to give the most credit to directors Kengo Furusawa and Takashi Tsuboshima for the overall quality of the pictures; between the two of them they directed 24 of the team's 30 features, and left an indelible stamp.

Furusawa had a reputation as something of an autocrat, and his tenacious helming of *Big Adventure* included his insistence that stunt doubles be avoided

wherever possible. For one particularly *Mad World*-inspired sequence, Ueki is cornered by a Nazi agent and falls off the top of a building, his fall broken by electrical wires a la Kramer's film. Unlike the American movie, however, Furusawa insisted Ueki take the plunge himself. Although he was lowered from the building very slowly (the film was sped up later), it was enough to make producer Shin Watanabe scream "You going to kill my star!" In another sequence, Ueki is seen clinging to the roof of a fast-moving car, driven by enemy spies. Ueki fell from the vehicle, dislocating his ankle. Later still, Ueki is seen on a horse, trying to jump onto a moving train. "That was scary!" Ueki says. "The director was telling me to act scared, but he didn't have to ask! [Furusawa] ordered me to do it so cavalierly. 'But we're going to shoot your face,' he'd say."

With *Big Adventure*, Toho was clearly trying to break The Crazy Cats into the international market, probably guessing the combination of James Bond-like shenanigans and Eiji Tsuburaya's miniatures would cinch it. That didn't happen, but the picture did gross ¥220,000,000 in Japan (about \$610,000), making it Japan's seventh highest grossing film that year. ⇒

Below: Japanese poster for one of the best Crazy Cats films, *Big Adventure* (1965), cryptically retitled *Don't Call Me a Crime Man* for its limited stateside release.



CRAZY CATS

Hitoshi Ueki was often paired with actress Mie Hama. Besides playing "Kissy Suzuki" in the James Bond film, Hama appeared in everything from *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962) and *King Kong Escapes*

(1967) to the Tatsuya Mihashi thriller *International Secret Police: Key of Keys* (1965), which became the basis for Woody Allen's spy spoof *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966). "Ueki was the son of a monk at a temple," Hama told me in a recent interview, "and very quiet usually. That's why they could perform so wildly.

The very first film I did with them was very weird because there was such a strong contrast—it was weird to see. Especially seeing them play their musical instruments, the tempo and all that. Kei Tani liked to trick people once in a while. At the bottom of his heart he is very serious, and so he was able to bluff people with his serious expression. In Los Angeles, Kei and Sakurai were in the same hotel room when they returned from shooting one day, Sakurai went to the toilet and was terrified by a disembodied head: Tani-san had put a rubber mask in the toilet! Generally speaking however, their personalities were very quiet and subdued."

"We classify actresses into two basic groups: traditional Japanese and Western style," Ueki explains. "Hama can do both, which is very unusual. And like Kei Tani she's also very sharp. That's also why she could be a Bond girl. And also a very charming lady. Now she's a mother, and doesn't act so much. She still looks like a model, too. She was one of the great actresses to come out of the young generation in the Toho Company. The company kept wanting to put her in comedies, but she didn't want to do it too much...she must have felt a lot of frustration."

"To be honest, I was not too crazy about making them," Hama admits. "It's a story with a lot of contradictions. It was fun, but I often argued with director Furusawa about the characters I had to play, and wondered when I could quit. After several films, I really wanted to quit being an actress. Even though there were great actresses making great films, I was working with Hitoshi Ueki and Godzilla. Still, over time I came to understand it and have fun with it."

Other actors, like Yu Fujiki (*Godzilla vs. the Thing*, *Las Vegas Free-for-All*, Kurosawa's *The Lower Depths*), found great satisfaction appearing in these pictures. "Salaryman comedies were really Toho's main genre," Fujiki explains. "That's where the studio made its money, which was then given to people like Kurosawa to make their movies. I could market myself as an actor thanks to The Crazy Cats movies."

Popular as they were, The Crazy Cats movies were accorded budgets much smaller than dramas, just like American comedy team features of the '30s and '40s. "The gap [between genres] was huge in Japan," Ueki says. "Our comedies were made for half or one-third the cost of the dramas. Our special movies, the ones in Hawaii and Mexico and Las Vegas, had three times the budgets of our regular movies. The Crazy Cats were in the top five at the box office every year for five years, so they knew by the time we did the big films abroad that they would be successful."

Indeed, three of the team's four 1966 releases made that year's Top Ten Grossing Films in Japan, which undoubtedly led to the lavish films that followed. The first of these was *Las Vegas Free-for-All*, Toho's big 35th Anniversary picture, which cost ¥180,000,000 (about \$500,000, made when ticket prices averaged ¥400, about \$1.00). The film was directed by Takashi Tsuboshima, who earned a reputation as a more delicate, subtler director than Kengo Furusawa. In fact, Furusawa and Tsuboshima enjoyed a friendly rivalry, each trying to shape the series in their own different image.

Running 157 minutes—making it one of the few Japanese films from this period not part of a double bill—and filmed, in part, on location abroad, *Las Vegas Free-for-All* was The Crazy Cats' biggest film. More clearly inspired by ⇒ 84

The Crazy Cats Series

CRAZY FREE-FOR-ALL: DON'T DELAY (1963) Director: Seiji Hisamatsu. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Hajime Hana, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Kei Tani, Junko Ikeuchi. 96 min. Plot: Con artist Ueki climbs the corporate ladder at an arbitration agency.

CRAZY FREE-FOR-ALL: DIE, IRRESPONSIBLE! (1963) Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Mie Hama, Yoko Fujiyama. 92 min. Plot: A dessert company invents Hasuru-Cola, tests it on their worst employee (Ueki), who becomes super-energized and confident.

HONG KONG FREE-FOR-ALL (1963) Director: Toshio Sugie. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Mie Hama, Mie Nakao. 93 min. Plot: The proprietors of a Tonkazu (deep-fried pork) restaurant match wits with a Chinese developer and eventually open a Japanese restaurant in Hong Kong.

BIG ADVENTURE (1965) Producers: Masumi Fujiki and Shin Watanabe. Director: Kengo Furusawa. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Hajime Hana, Kei Tani, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Fubuki Koshiji, Reiko Dan, Fuyuki Murakami, The Peanuts (Emi and Yumi Ito), Andrew Hughes. U.S. titles: *Don't Call Me a Con Man*, *Don't Call Me a Crime Man*. 106 min. Plot: A reporter (Ueki), detective (Hana), and inventor (Tani) uncover a secret plot by a still-living Adolph Hitler to launch nuclear missiles.

CRAZY IRRESPONSIBLES AT SHIMIZU HARBOR (1966) Producers: Masumi Fujiki and Shin Watanabe. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Mie Hama, Noriko Takahashi, Reiko Dan, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Eitaro Ishibashi, Shin Yasuda, Yu Fujiki. U.S. title: *The Boss of Pick-Pocket Bay*. 94 min. Plot: Samurai comedy about warring families and shyler gamblers. Most of the cast reprised their roles in *Taking a Crazy Punch at Shimizu Harbor* (1970).

IT'S CRAZY—I CAN'T EXPLAIN IT WAY OUT THERE (1966) Producer: Shin Watanabe. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Hitoshi Ueki, Yunko Hoshi, Noriko Takahashi, Yumiko Nogawa, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Eitaro Ishibashi, Shin Yasuda, Yu Fujiki. Possible international title: *The Man from Planet Alpha*. 103 min. Plot: Peaceful aliens trying to prevent the launching of a nuclear weapon possess the body of an ordinary Japanese salaryman.

GREAT CRAZY FREE-FOR-ALL (1966) Producer: Shin Watanabe. Director: Kengo Furusawa. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Hajime Hana, Kei Tani, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Yumiko Nogawa, Akemi Fuji. 100 min. Plot: The Crazy Cats try to steal ¥1,000,000,000 in laundered Yakuza money.

INDUSTRIAL SPY FREE-FOR-ALL (1967) Producer: Shin Watanabe. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Yumiko Nogawa, Akemi Kita, Noriko Takahashi, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Hajime Hana. 95 min. Plot: Appliance companies vie for their rivals' secrets.

LAS VEGAS FREE-FOR-ALL (1967) Producer: Shin Watanabe. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Mie Hama, Peggy Neal, Mari Sono, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi,

The Peanuts (Emi and Yumi Ito), (The) Johnnys, Jackie Yoshikawa and the Blue Comets, Yu Fujiki, Andrew Hughes, George Furness. 157 min. Plot: Shyster Ueki counterfeits thousands of dollars in Casino chips and travels to Las Vegas with corrupt politician Hana and doctor Tani, the latter having inherited a seemingly worthless gold mine.

MONSIEUR ZIVACO (1967) Producer: Shin Watanabe. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Mie Hama, Yoshiko Toyoura, Andrew Hughes. 110 min. Plot: International thief Zivaco, who can assume any identity, eludes the authorities and battles rival thief WCWC (Hughes) for a rare gold samurai sword.

MEXICAN FREE-FOR-ALL (1968) Producers: Shin Watanabe and Mikihiro Omori. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Mie Hama, Mayumi Ozora, Mari Sono, Anna Martin, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi. Released in Mexico as *El Gran Tesoro Olmeca*. 162 min. Plot: The Crazy Cats search for a stone statue which holds the key to an enormous gold treasure in Mexico.

COMPUTER FREE-FOR-ALL (1969) Producers: Shin Watanabe and Mikihiro Omori. Director: Kengo Furusawa. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Mari Nakamura. 84 min. Plot: When the Yakuza murder a bar hostess who, through a computer error, had amassed a huge fortune, The Crazy Cats make a robot duplicate of her.

THE CRAZY'S GREAT EXPLOSION (1969) Producers: Mikihiro Omori and Yasuo Tanami. Director: Kengo Furusawa. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi, Kiko Matsuka. 83 min. Plot: In the year 197X, Japan has become the largest gold-hoarding nation in the world, and a female agent from GIB enlists the unwitting Crazy Cats to steal ¥30 billion from the government.

TAKING A CRAZY PUNCH AT SHIMIZU HARBOR (1970) Producers: Shin Watanabe and Yasuo Tanami. Director: Takashi Tsuboshima. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hajime Hana, Keiko Natsu, Yoko Naito, Yuriko Hoshi, Osami Nabe, Akemi Kita, Eisei Amamoto, Akihiko Hirata, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi. 95 min. Plot: The cast of *Crazy Irresponsibles at Shimizu Harbor* (1966) return in this flop sequel.

ALSO OF NOTE:

ME AND ME (1962) Director: Toshio Sugie. Cast: Akira Takarada, The Peanuts (Emi and Yumi Ito), Hajime Hana, Hitoshi Ueki, The Crazy Cats (i.e., the rest of the group: Kei Tani, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda, Eitaro Ishibashi). 91 min.

YOUNG GENERATION (1962) Director: Kengo Furusawa. Cast: Hitoshi Ueki, Kyu Sakamoto, Hajime Hana, Kei Tani, Reiko Dan, Yoko Fujiyama, Mie Hama, Akihiko Hirata, Kenji Sahara, Akiko Wakabayashi. 88 min.

MEMORIES OF YOU (1988) Producer: Toshiaki Nakagawa. Director: Jun Ichikawa. Cast: Hajime Hana, Yumi Nishiyama, Hitoshi Ueki, Kei Tani, Hiroshi Inuzuka, Shiro Ito, Hana Kino, Kei Suma, Senri Sakurai, Shin Yasuda. International title: *The Story of a Company*. 103 min.

Mad, Mad, World's epic style, the team became fish out of water as they traveled to Hawaii, Los Angeles, and, not surprisingly, Las Vegas, Nevada. As previously mentioned, the "lesser" Crazy Cats would turn up in supporting roles in these films, often with surprising results. Here Inuzuka turns up as an Indian, while Ishibashi and Yasuda play, hilariously if none-too-convincingly, American mobsters. Much of the film is in English, though the Japanese cast struggles mightily with the dialogue. As virtually all interiors were shot at Toho, the Western cast consisted almost entirely of part-time amateur actors living in Tokyo at the time. Peggy Neal, the ingenue from **Terror Beneath the Sea** (1966) and **The X from Outer Space** (1967), turns up in a femme fatale role, and George Furness, an attorney-turned-actor who appeared in American films shot in Japan like **The Last Voyage** (1960) and **My Geisha** (1962), turns up as an executor of gambler Andrew Hughes's (**Destroy All Monsters**) estate.

Shooting in the United States proved difficult for the modest Japanese crew. "Because of the unions, we had to hire an American staff from MGM and Fox," Ueki says, "otherwise we couldn't have gotten permission to shoot anywhere. We'd set up a shot at 11:50, and members of the Japanese crew would say, 'Okay everybody, we'll film this scene, and then we'll all have lunch together.' And the American crew would say, 'Okay, okay. Yeah, we know,' and then, during the middle of a shot, the American crew suddenly stopped and started eating their lunch! [laughs]. It's very difficult shooting in foreign countries."

Las Vegas presented its own particular challenge. Probably the film's finest moment—not in the original script and devised on location—comes when all seven

Crazy Cats sing and dance down Las Vegas Boulevard as bemused gamblers look on. Traffic down the sensationally lit street was halted, and the playback music had to be turned up loud enough to compete with the noise coming from the noisy casinos. The Mafia was none-too-happy with the attention-grabbing film crew, whose production was drawing crowds out of the casinos and into the streets, and—ahem—made their anger known to the cast and crew. Despite these difficulties, **Las Vegas Free-for-All** proved to be one of the team's most popular films, raking in Y324,000,000, making it Japan's third-highest moneymaker.

Las Vegas Free-for-All was followed by the fun but overlong **Monsieur Zivaco** (*Kureji no-kaito Jibako*, 1967), about a notorious international thief who can assume any identity (even appearing, albeit briefly, in the gorilla costume from *King Kong Escapes*), though for most of the picture the role is played by Ueki. After that, *The Crazy Cats* went to Mexico and San Francisco for **Mexican Free-for-All** (*Kureji Mekishiko dai sakusen*, 1968), but by then their popularity was beginning to wane, possibly due to massive over-exposure in virtually every media. (This overexposure, probably more than anything else, also killed Abbott & Costello's career during the early '50s.)

In 1971, the writing was on the wall, and The Crazy Cats went their separate ways. The diminutive Senri Sakurai, tiny even by Japanese standards (he stood about 4'11") became a staple of television commercials as "Grandma Senri," the Japanese equivalent of Jonathan Winters's "Maude Frickert" character. Eitaro Ishibashi launched a successful cooking show, and Kei Tani became a regular in Yoji Yamada's "Fishing Foot" film series, still going strong with nine films in nine years.

Before his death, Hajime Hana established himself

as an outstanding character actor in films like Hideo Gosha's epic samurai drama *Hunter in the Dark* (1979) and, like Sakurai, did fine work in several films by writer-director Yamada, who also helmed Shochiku's "Tora-san" series. Yasuda and Inuzuka are likewise still active on the stage and in television.

Ueki continues to make records and appear in films. One film appearance that surprised everyone was his role as a general in Kurosawa's masterful take on Shakespeare's "King Lear": **Ran** (1985). "Kurosawa had a role with me in mind and called my manager," Ueki recalls. "My manager told me whether or not I accept it doesn't matter, but naturally I should be polite and go and see him. I was left in a room alone with him, and he crossed the room, shook my hand and said, 'Thank you very much for accepting my offer!' [laughs] That's it! It was a kind of sudden incident."

Soon thereafter all of The Crazy Cats save Ishibashi appeared in a quirky, melancholy little drama called ***Memories of You*** (1988), which starred Hana as a middle-aged businessman about to retire. Later still Ueki did a solo concert which was taped for broadcast and home video at a packed NHK Hall. During the encore Hana, Tani, Inuzuka, Sakurai, and Yasuda all walked on stage and the audience went berserk. "I didn't expect their appearance," Ueki says. "I was very surprised and very happy by it."

"I feel a real loneliness because Hana-san isn't here. Last year Kei Tani wrote a book about his life, and he wrote a message saying please, please never forget The Crazy Cats. I feel exactly the same way."

(Special thanks to Hitoshi Ueki, Mie Hama, Yu Fujiki, and Tomoko Suzuki of Watanabe Production for their valuable assistance in the preparation of this article.)

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